11 Practical Ways to Guide Teachers

Toward Differentiation

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| 1. Know the Standard |
| Rationale:  Standards provide the base for teachers to use in planning customized learning opportunities. Teachers strategically select the standard for each lesson. They interweave the strategies and activities to teach it.  Teachers often begin with standards that can be easily tied to strategies and activities that match their own intelligences, learning styles, and modalities. For example, a teacher with an affinity for music is apt to select standards that can be taught through musical experiences. |
| 2. Vary Instructional Strategies and Activities |
| Rationale:  A variety of novel, stimulating strategies and activities will intrigue and challenge minds. Learning experiences must be planned to entice students with exciting, meaningful content. The learner must be guided to create relevant, personal connections to each lesson. When uniqueness and novelty are evident, students are more likely to focus on the lesson. More students grasp information and adapt it when their learning styles, modalities, intelligences, and interests are engaged. |
| 3. Create a Learning Climate |
| Rationale:  A differentiated classroom provides a safe, inviting environment. Learners are respected and made to feel that they are special. They know their errors will become learning opportunities. Risk taking is promoted. Success is celebrated.  An effective, personalized climate is designed to motivate, challenge, and stimulate each student’s desire to improve and to know more. The visuals convey the content and skills from recent teaching and learning. Displays of work reflect differentiated instruction and personalized learning opportunities. Areas are designated for learning stations or centers. Desks and tables are conducive to partner and small group work. The room feels like a special place to learn. |
| 4. Exhibit “Withitness” |
| Rationale:  “Withit” teachers exhibit a passion for teaching. They instill a love of learning. They know that their own attitudes determine the students’ learning achievement. These teachers show they care and make each class member feel that he or she is a valuable part of the diverse learning culture. These special educators create a rapport with the class and often become a legend in the students’ lives. |
| 5. Provide a Wide Variety of Materials and Resources |
| Rationale:  In a differentiated classroom, the teacher selects materials and resources to coordinate the learners’ knowledge, ability levels, and interests. The teacher creates productive problem solvers and thinkers while challenging and stimulating minds in novel ways. The selected materials provide successful experiences for learners. |
| 6. Know the Students |
| Rationale:  Teachers must learn as much about each student as possible. Improved understanding of individual students helps guide teachers’ decision making to match appropriate materials and strategies to meet each learner’s needs. |
| 7. Assess Before, During, and After the Learning |
| Rationale:  A strong pre-assessment is an essential tool. An informal or formal assessment tool identifies the students’ knowledge base, prior experiences, and interests related to the standard or topic. Teachers identify this information one or two weeks before planning a lesson to be able to effectively and strategically meet the needs of a specific group of learners.  Before a new topic is introduced, teachers should ask:   * What do students know? * What can they do? * What are their interests in the topic? |
| 8. Adjust Assignments |
| Rationale:  Teachers must adjust assignments according to the student’s needs, knowledge base, and interests:   * One group of students has high interest in the topic and knows the information. They lessons may be boring and redundant for these learners. They need an alternative assignment that will entice and challenge them. A contract, a different agenda, or a project may be assigned. * Another group of students may be ready for the new information. These learners have the proper knowledge base and background and are ready to learn the standard. * A third group of students may not have adequate background or knowledge about the skill or topic. These students are not ready for the information. Provisions must be made in the plan to fill the gaps in their knowledge. |
| 9. Plan Student-Focused Opportunities |
| Rationale:  In student-focused activities, assignments meet individual needs and interests. Learning experiences are designed to fit the student’s intelligences, learning styles, modalities, and interests. Several instructional techniques accomplish this task, including centers, labs, stations, agendas, menus, choice boards, cooperative learning, and contracts. |
| 10. Use Flexible Grouping Designs |
| Rationale:  Flexible grouping designs are vital components in planning for differentiated instruction. The acronym TAPS ⎯ T=Total groups, A=Alone, P=Partners, and S=Small groups (Gregory & Chapman, 2001) ⎯ helps teachers understand ways to engage learners. Using a variety of these group designs allows students to move according to their demonstrated performances, interests, and varied knowledge levels.  Each student needs experiences in all grouping designs. Instruction planned with a variety of grouping scenarios taps into the learner’s potential, allowing students to learn how to work both independently and in different groups. |
| 11. Know Change is Gradual |
| Rationale:  Staff developers, curriculum specialists, and administrators must remember that change comes gradually. In their leadership and coaching roles, they also must differentiate their approaches to guide teachers on paths to differentiation. Each teacher is unique in professional knowledge, experiences, and interest in implementing this philosophy.  Teachers often experience dissonance when asked to replace teaching beliefs with new approaches. In this state, they cling to familiar, successful practices as they become aware of their need to change. Teachers will embrace a differentiated program when they realize that it leads to more successful experiences for students. |

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